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POLICY ISSUES: COORDINATION AND COOPERATION WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS

Proposal for a future strategy document in the field of the environment as a successor to the System-wide Medium-term Environment Programme (SWMTEP)

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The present document is submitted pursuant to Governing Council decision 17/16 of May 1995, on the implementation and mid-term review of the United Nations system-wide medium-term environment programme (SWMTEP) for 1995, in which the Executive Director was requested to report on the need for a United Nations system-wide strategy and planning document in the field of the environment. In consultation with the relevant United Nations organizations, the Executive Director has undertaken an assessment of the continuing need for an environmental strategy and planning document in the field of the environment on the basis of, inter alia, the experience gained in the implementation of SWMTEP, the emerging post United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) institutional arrangements and the continuing need for system-wide environment coordination and consultations with executive heads, as outlined in a letter with proposals concerning the future discharge of the coordination mandate of UNEP and, specifically, the need for such a document. Proposals for a strategy and planning document were further provided for the consideration of United Nations partner organizations in a background paper (IAEG/1/2) at the first Inter-Agency Environment Coordination Group (IAEG) meeting, held from 31 October to 1 November 1994 in Geneva. On the basis of the discussions and conclusions reached at that meeting and considerations regarding the working role and responsibilities of UNEP and the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), the present report proposes the preparation of a strategy document, focusing on the major environmental challenges as contained in the proposed UNEP Fund programme, to be submitted to the Governing Council in 1997.

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Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

(a) Take note of the report of the Executive Director concerning the need for a United Nations system-wide strategy document in the field of environment;

(b) Endorse the assessment of the Executive Director that there is a need for a strategy document and recommend that such a document be prepared as a mechanism to enable UNEP to discharge its policy guidance and coordination mandate;

(c) Endorse the recommendation that the strategy document should focus on the major environmental challenges as contained in the programme for the utilization of the resources of the Environment Fund for 1996-1997 (UNEP/GC.18/9);

(d) Stress that, in preparing the strategy, full account be taken of the role, responsibilities and work of the task managers system established for the servicing of CSD;

(e) Request the Executive Director to submit to the Governing Council at its regular session in 1997 the draft strategy document, to become operational in 1998, concurrently with the United Nations Medium-term Plan (UNMTP) for 1998-2003.

Background

1. The first system-wide medium-term environment programme (SWMTEP), as originally conceived, was a formalization of bilateral, multilateral and thematic joint programming initiated by UNEP in its early years and was endorsed by the Governing Council at its sixth session in 1978. The 1979 Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) report to the Governing Council focused on thematic joint programming exercises between UNEP and other United Nations agencies, and expressed the willingness of ACC to extend full cooperation in the SWMTEP endeavour and in the development of the requisite methodology during the experimental phase between 1978 and 1982. In 1979, at its nineteenth session, the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) reviewed the system of United Nations medium-term planning and made several recommendations to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, including that thematic joint programming should be developed into an effective programming instrument for the medium-term programme and that SWMTEP should be developed as a management tool for all organizations. The 1986 ACC report noted that SWMTEP-I was the only system-wide effort which had proved to be of great value in the planning and implementation of environmental activities. Moreover, it had offered fresh forms of dialogue and cooperation. ACC also observed that the entire United Nations system had cooperated on the development of a methodology for SWMTEP. The Governing Council subsequently invited ACC to review and further develop this methodology through the Designated Officials for Environmental Matters (DOEM).

2. SWMTEP-II covers the period 1990-1995, but has experienced difficulties in its implementation due, inter alia, to the different mandates, governance and programming cycles of the various United Nations organizations, developments in relation to the UNCED process which supersedes SWMTEP and problems in preparation and implementation. This was evidenced by the fact that SWMTEP was provided to only one governing body, apart from the UNEP Governing Council, and then only for information. As such SWMTEP-II never achieved the status of a programming document for the United Nations system in the field of environment.

3. The Governing Council at its seventeenth session had before it a report on the implementation and mid-term review of SWMTEP-II (UNEP/GC.17/6), as requested in Governing Council decision 15/21. Based on the mid-term review,

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which took into account self-evaluations undertaken by United Nations agencies, the Executive Director concluded that, although SWMTEP had been a useful vehicle for UNEP in environment coordination, for a number of reasons it had not served its original purpose as an instrument for planning and formulating the environment programme of the United Nations system. The Executive Director therefore recommended, inter alia, that the Governing Council should defer the decision on the future of SWMTEP, and that she would evaluate whether there was still a need for a system-wide strategy and planning document and report thereon to the Council at its eighteenth session. If it is concluded that there is a need for such a document, it would commence in 1998 to be compatible with the planning cycle of UNMTP for 1998-2003, and would take into account the lessons learned in the preparation and implementation of the current SWMTEP. In making these recommendations, the Executive Director noted that the future arrangements for system-wide coordination in the field of the environment would be of critical importance, and that a strategy and planning document would have to be compatible with and complementary to the post-UNCED institutional arrangements, especially the work of the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD) and CSD with its multi-year thematic programme of work.

4. A background paper containing UNEP proposals for a strategy and planning document in the field of environment as a successor to SWMTEP was prepared for the consideration of the members of the IAEG, in which it was emphasized that, in view of the policy guidance and coordination mandate of UNEP, as reaffirmed in Agenda 21, and the rationale for the establishment of the IAEG, it is the assessment of the Executive Director that a strategy and planning document would provide clarity and direction to system-wide environment activities. Furthermore, in conceptualizing the nature of such a document, the substantive priority areas for UNEP leadership, as recommended by Agenda 21, chapter 38.22, would form its core.

5. The strategy and planning document would be expected to draw on the technical and intellectual capacity of concerned United Nations organizations to develop a system-wide understanding of the evolution and strategic thrust of identified programme areas over the medium-term, which would accord with the policy guidance mandate of the UNEP Governing Council. It could also be foreseen that the parameters of the document could be defined to include areas in addition to those that have been allocated to UNEP in Agenda 21, chapter 38.22. This would enlarge the scope of the strategy to include the areas of toxic chemicals, hazardous wastes, desertification, biodiversity and, in association with the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), solid wastes and human settlements, in which UNEP has been designated as task manager for CSD in the United Nations system. Criteria could also be established to include additional programme areas in relation to the UNEP programme of work for 1996-1997.

6. The UNEP proposal further emphasized that it was clear from the experience of SWMTEP that a detailed and time-consuming programming exercise would be inefficient and even counter-productive. A strategy document should be perceived as providing a generally agreed policy guidance and frame of reference for individual actions or joint programming that would be influenced by the best substantive expertise available in the system. It should provide a clear picture of the relevant competence available in the system and a clear indication to the international community of the collective thrust of system-wide environmental activities.

7. The UNEP proposal noted that a strategy and planning document would also have implications with regard to the Environment Fund, which is mandated to finance wholly or partly the costs of the new environmental initiatives undertaken within the United Nations system, with the Governing Council being charged with reviewing these initiatives with a view to taking appropriate decisions as to their continued financing.

8. In terms of timing and programming cycles, the UNEP proposal also noted that the Governing Council endorsed the recommendation of the Executive Director that a strategy document, if agreed, should commence in 1998-2003, to be compatible with the planning cycle of UNMTP. An additional benefit of this timing would be that it could be brought in line with the review of the implementation of Agenda 21 and the functioning of CSD by the General Assembly in 1997. The preparatory process for the document would also greatly influence the development of the 1998-1999 UNEP biennial programme of work, which would have to be in line with the thrust of the document.

System-wide views on the need for a strategy and planning document in the field of the environment, as expressed at the first IAEG meeting

9. Discussion at the IAEG meeting revealed a general consensus on the value of a strategic as opposed to a planning document, which would help to ensure complementarity within the United Nations system, and that it should not be a SWMTEP type of document. It was noted that, even if the document were synchronized with UNMTP, it would still not be in accordance with many of the programming cycles of United Nations organizations. However, if the document were based on strategic joint goals, rather than plans which could not foresee developments in the environment field, the flexibility would make it easier to cope with the lack of synchronization. Certain IAEG members felt that it could be difficult to explain to their governing bodies, which have different mandates and priorities, the efficacy of a planning document. At the same time, they acknowledged that it would be useful to demonstrate to governing bodies how their environmental strategies fit into a system-wide approach, which would assist in justifying environmental proposals as collective views of the system, as well as serving as a day-to-day management tool.

10. Suggestions on how to develop such a document included examining the strategic elements in UNEP's biennial work programme to identify commonalities as a basis for a strategic document. It was suggested that UNEP initially collect and compile the strategies developed and approved by individual agencies in response to UNCED and other relevant material and distil from them environmental trends, synthesize and analyse interlinkages, gaps and mutually supportive goals, and determine their complementarity as a basis for further documentation. However, members cautioned that the documents collected would be disparate in nature and noted that the term "strategy" would have to be used consistently. It was requested that, in the context of the discussion, all relevant documentation be made available to UNEP.

11. While it was noted that the Governing Council required an indication of the conceptual need for such a document and that the draft strategy would be required by 1998, it was suggested that the strategic document should be short; deal with policy and funding implications of strategies; and address, if relevant, the strategic use of the Environment Fund and the steps that would be necessary from strategy to programming. It was pointed out that strategies at the global level are often not filtering down to the country level and further work would be required on the translation of global strategies to national implementation, where relevant. It was also suggested that the document could be proactive in integrating strategic environmental relationships with United Nations conferences and conventions.

Recommendations

12. In light of the system-wide views expressed, the Governing Council may wish to decide that SWMTEP should be succeeded by a system-wide strategy document, as a common frame of reference for future work and programming of the system in the field of the environment.

13. In considering this decision, the Governing Council may take into account the fact that the mandates of the Council and the Executive Director in the field of policy guidance and coordination of the environmental activities of the United Nations system show signs of overlap with the mandates and evolving practice of CSD and IACSD, respectively, to provide for policy guidance and,

through the system of task managers, coordinate the activities of the system in the field of sustainable development.

14. The Governing Council may further take into account that, partly as a consequence of the above, the Executive Director proposes to adopt a focused issue-oriented Fund programme, concentrating on major challenges in the field of the environment and taking into account the priority tasks assigned to UNEP by Agenda 21. Rather than financially supporting the activities of other parts of the United Nations system, the resources of the UNEP Fund will be used to implement and seek partnership in implementing this proposed UNEP programme of activities. In discharging her mandate to coordinate the environmental activities of the United Nations system, keep them under review and assess their effectiveness, the Executive Director will focus on UNEP's role as task manager in the implementation of Agenda 21, so as to avoid duplication of efforts.

15. Promoting and coordinating the preparation of a longer-term strategy in the field of the environment should be seen and pursued against the background of the changing role and responsibilities of UNEP and its relationship with CSD. It would follow that the strategy would principally focus on the major challenges as contained in the proposed UNEP Fund programme and that in its preparation full account would be taken of the role, responsibilities and work of the task managers, with a view to avoiding duplication of efforts and making strategy compatible with and, preferably, part of the proposals, based on the review and appraisal of Agenda 21, to be submitted to the review conference in 1997.

16. The strategy document should be presented to the Governing Council at its regular session in 1997 and would commence in 1998, to be compatible with UNMTP 1998-2003.

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Addendum

Inter-Agency Environment Coordination Group (IAEG)

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The present report outlines developments relating to the establishment of the Inter-Agency Environment Coordination Group (IAEG), pursuant to Governing Council decision 17/9, which endorsed the course of action proposed to the Governing Council at its seventeenth session by the Executive Director in document UNEP/GC.17/12/Add.1, "to enable the Executive Director to discharge effectively the coordinating role required of UNEP by various legislative authorities". Following United Nations system-wide consultations and in order to take fully into account the working of the post-United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) arrangements at the intergovernmental and inter-agency levels, the Executive Director in August 1994 informed executive heads of United Nations agencies and organizations of her proposals concerning the future discharge of UNEP's coordination mandate. Executive heads were informed that, subject to their concurrence and as mandated by the Governing Council, she would be convening a meeting of the IAEG in the third quarter of 1994. Subsequently, the Executive Director chaired the first IAEG meeting in Geneva from 31 October to 1 November 1994. The IAEG had before it for its consideration background documents containing, inter alia, a proposal for the role and functioning of the IAEG. The present document outlines developments relating to the establishment of the IAEG and its role and functioning and summarizes the views of UNEP's partners as expressed at the first IAEG meeting.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

(a) Take note of the report of the Executive Director on the Inter-Agency Environment Coordination Group (IAEG);

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(b) Support the establishment of the IAEG as a flexible consultative and advisory body, meeting as and when required, to enable UNEP to discharge effectively its coordination mandate;

(c) Decide that the IAEG should focus on assisting the Executive Director in coordinating the activities of the United Nations system in addressing the major challenges, as contained in the programme for the utilization of the resources of the Environment Fund;

(d) Stress that, in determining the terms of reference and future activities of the IAEG, full account be taken of the role, responsibilities and work of the Inter-agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD) and its task - managing system, with a view to avoiding duplication of efforts and making the coordinating role and work of UNEP compatible with and complementary to that of IACSD;

(e) Encourage the further clarification of the IAEG's terms of reference, especially with reference to the role and functioning of IACSD;

(f) Request the Executive Director to report to the Governing Council at its regular session in 1997 on progress made in the work of the IAEG.

Inter-agency Environment Coordination Group (IAEG)

1. With the establishment of the institutional arrangements following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) UNEP undertook a review and refocusing of its functional coordination role. The resulting proposals for "Arrangements for system-wide cooperation and coordination in the field of the environment" (UNEP/GC.17/12/Add.1), submitted to the Governing Council at its seventeenth session, were made in the context of the reform of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) subsidiary structure and the report of the ACC Task Force on the UNCED follow-up that led to the establishment of the Inter-agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD). The Task Force, inter alia, recommended that "the ACC invite the Executive Director of UNEP to submit specific proposal on system-wide cooperation and coordination in the field of the environment". The Executive Director proposed, inter alia, the establishment of the IAEG to meet when required to address policy issues, emerging issues in the field of environment and any issues of a system-wide nature emanating from coordination at the programme level that require to be addressed at the policy level.

2. The background document provided to IAEG members contained a proposal on the role and functioning of the IAEG and outlined the background to and rationale for the IAEG, in view of UNEP's reaffirmed policy guidance and coordination mandate, as provided in Agenda 21, chapter 38.21, and of the assessment that there was a continuing need for UNEP, in collaboration with partners in the United Nations system, to have an effective forum to coordinate approaches to policy matters in the field of the environment, especially the 14 priority areas for UNEP leadership outlined in Agenda 21, chapter 38.22. The proposal took into account the mandate and work of IACSD and contained an assessment of IACSD's capacity to deal with policy issues and emerging issues in the field of the environment. The following terms of reference for the IAEG's functioning were proposed:

(a) Advise the Executive Director of UNEP, in preparing reports for the Governing Council of UNEP, on the discharge of its system-wide policy guidance role, informing the Council of environmental trends and emerging policy issues;

(b) Assist the Executive Director of UNEP in the selection of topics and the substantive preparation of the ACC report to the UNEP Governing Council, for which she is responsible to the ACC;

(c) Provide a forum for the exchange of information on important new initiatives in the field of the environment and, in particular, those that may be of relevance to the programmes and mandates of UNEP and other member institutions;

(d) Provide a forum for the discussion of the policy implications of new and emerging environmental issues that would require a coordinated response by the United Nations system;

(e) Provide a forum for discussion and play an advisory role for the Executive Director of UNEP concerning the development of a system-wide policy and strategy in the field of the environment and assist in the preparation of relevant reports to the Governing Council of UNEP. This would include the follow-up to UNEP Governing Council decisions on the System-wide Medium-term Environment Programme (SWMTEP);

(f) Assist the Executive Director of UNEP in the development of biennial programmes of work for submission to the Governing Council, including the review of the impact of UNEP's work and funding on the activities of the United Nations system.

3. A new IAEG would thus have to reflect a refocusing of UNEP's functional coordination arrangements and be designed as a flexible mechanism, meeting when required, to complement and reinforce more regular coordination activities at the programme manager level. Therefore, the following criteria were proposed to guide the IAEG's functioning and enhance and maintain its relevance and utility: cost effectiveness; flexibility; value-added; complementarity; and partnership. The first meeting of the IAEG (Geneva, 31 October - 1 November 1994) was attended by 14 concerned United Nations organizations and addressed the role and functioning of the IAEG; proposals for a future strategy and planning document in the field of the environment as a successor document to SWMTEP; the ACC report to the UNEP Governing Council; and the preparation for the 1996-1997 UNEP programme and the role of United Nations agencies and programmes therein.

4. The IAEG meeting revealed a general consensus on the potential usefulness of a flexible coordinating mechanism on environmental matters. An IAEG should form coherent positions and facilitate UNEP's catalytic and coordinating role, supplementing the coordination responsibility of UNEP programme managers at the programme level and it should, as a precondition, have distinct terms of reference which would ensure complementarity with the work and mandate of IACSD, in order to avoid duplication of effort. Such terms of reference should, therefore, initially focus explicitly on the areas of Agenda 21 designated for UNEP's leadership, which all contain significant areas for collaboration with other United Nations organizations. It was emphasized that IAEG is not an ACC subsidiary, but a consultative and advisory body, and that a functional relationship to IACSD should be established.

5. The IAEG was also viewed as an advisory body to UNEP's Executive Director, to indicate gaps and assess the effectiveness of UNEP's catalytic and coordinating role in the United Nations system and to provide access for members to UNEP's Executive Director. It was emphasized that the IAEG should be a true partnership, which should be reflected in concrete outputs. There was a general feeling that IAEG should initially operate and meet on an ad hoc basis, evolving with experience to distinguish it from IACSD and stressing the value of an informal and flexible forum, without strict institutional requirements. Hence,

the agenda should be agreed on an ad hoc basis, with the meeting based on well-prepared documentation with clear points for decision. Others felt that, while a highly institutionalized body should be avoided, certain issues were of a recurrent nature and proposals for IAEG's functions should not be too broad. The proposed criteria to guide IAEG were generally agreeable.

6. The IAEG would also facilitate the flow of information on ongoing and proposed environmental programmes and the related needs of UNEP and partner organizations as a two-way communication process. UNEP could offer guidance to partner organizations in certain areas and, in turn, would be provided with feedback on new environmental thinking within United Nations organizations. Discussions on UNEP's programming were considered particularly important, in order to provide information on how UNEP views its evolving role and to define the dialogue on joint programming. The IAEG would also be used to decide collectively on topics for future ACC reports to the UNEP Governing Council, reflecting what executive heads wish to bring to Governing Council's attention. In future, the IAEG would consider how to improve coordination at the regional and country levels and possibly coordinate environmental inputs into United Nations conferences where necessary.

Recommendations

7. The system-wide views expressed at the meeting of the IAEG reveal that there may be a case for establishing an IAEG, meeting as and when required and with terms of reference which would ensure complementarity with the work and mandate of IACSD.

8. It follows that, in considering the matter, the Governing Council should take into account the fact that the mandates of the Council and of the Executive Director of UNEP in the field of policy guidance and coordination of the environmental activities of the United Nations system show signs of overlap with the mandate and evolving practice of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and IACSD, respectively, to provide for policy guidance and, through the system of task managers, coordinate the activities of the United Nations system in the field of sustainable development.

9. The Governing Council may further take into account that, partly as a consequence of the above, the Executive Director proposes that the Council adopt a focused issue-oriented Fund programme, concentrating on major challenges in the field of the environment and taking into account the priority tasks assigned to UNEP by Agenda 21. Rather than financially supporting activities of other parts of the United Nations system, the resources of the UNEP Fund will be used to implement and seek partnership in implementing the proposed UNEP programme of activities. In discharging her mandate to coordinate the environmental activities of the United Nations system, keep them under review and assess their effectiveness, the Executive Director will focus on UNEP's role as task manager in the implementation of Agenda 21, so as to avoid duplication of efforts.

10. Coordination of the environmental activities of the United Nations system should be seen and pursued against the background of the changing role and responsibilities of UNEP and its relationship with CSD. It would follow that, in discharging her coordination mandate, the Executive Director would principally focus on the major challenges contained in the proposed UNEP Fund programme, while taking full account of the role, responsibilities and work of IACSD and its task manager system with a view to avoiding duplication of efforts and making the coordinating role and work of UNEP serve both the interests of UNEP and those of CSD and IACSD.

11. Against this background, UNEP should:

(a) Continue to clarify the IAEG's functional linkages and legal relationship to IACSD. On the basis of this clarification and opinions voiced at the first IAEG meeting, UNEP should draw up revised terms of reference for the IAEG, to be submitted to the IAEG members for their approval;

(b) Coordination and consultation at the programmatic level should be primarily the responsibility of programme managers and would be complemented by the work of the IAEG at the policy level;

(c) The IAEG should play a key role in assisting the Executive Director in preparing for the ACC's consideration of environmental matters and for the Governing Council's consideration of matters relating to system-wide environment coordination;

(d) The IAEG would function as a flexible mechanism, meeting as required.